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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, AF/SPG, AF/E, JERUSALEM FOR  
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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SU](#) [ER](#) [IZ](#) [EG](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH UNHCR'S REGIONAL  
REPRESENTATIVE

REF: A. CAIRO 1762  
[1](#)B. CAIRO 1972  
[1](#)C. CAIRO 1231  
[1](#)D. CAIRO 1258  
[1](#)E. CAIRO 2384  
[1](#)F. CAIRO 2271  
[1](#)G. 2006 CAIRO 170

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with Saad Al Attar, UNHCR's Regional Representative in Cairo on November 25. Al Attar told the Ambassador about UNHCR's challenges to meet its responsibilities given a lack of funding, the situation of Iraqi refugees in Egypt, and UNHCR's dealings with the Government of Egypt (GOE). He said that a recent American University in Cairo (AUC) study estimated that there are only 20,000 Iraqis in Egypt, dispelling the GOE claim of 150,000 Iraqis in the country. Al Attar stated that many Iraqis living in Egypt were choosing to return to Iraq. He said that economic conditions in Egypt made life extremely difficult for other refugees, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, leading some to search for better economic opportunities either in Israel or Europe. The Ambassador suggested that UNHCR's High Commissioner in Geneva write a letter to President Mubarak dissuading him from the policy of shooting migrants on the Egypt-Israel border. Al Attar agreed and said he would act on this suggestion. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Al Attar told the Ambassador that the UNHCR Cairo office has three roles: to advise the GOE on its responsibilities toward refugees; to provide technical assistance and protection for refugees; and to supply basic services such as medical care and education. He said that his office's resources are strained because of the increase in the refugee population in Egypt over the last decade. Al Attar stated that since 1997, the number of refugees, registered in Egypt, has grown ten-fold, but UNHCR's budget has only doubled. He said the stipend given to refugees today is equivalent to only USD 20 in 1997 dollars. Al Attar mentioned that the education budget provided is only adequate to support the school expenses for 30 percent of the 9,700 school-age (5-18 years) children registered as refugees.

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Iraqi Refugees in Egypt  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) Al Attar told the Ambassador that he was pleased an AUC study recently placed the number of Iraqis living in Egypt at around 15,000-20,000. He said this figure was more in line with UNHCR's estimate of 18,000 rather than the GOE's figure of 150,000. UNHCR data indicates that there are

10,243 registered Iraqi refugees in Egypt, and UNHCR estimates there are an additional 8,000 Iraqis that have not registered, some which have ties to the regime of Saddam Hussein, and others that had money when they arrived from Iraq and did not need UNHCR's financial assistance. Al Attar told the Ambassador that the number of Iraqis registered with UNHCR in Egypt has not diminished appreciably despite Egypt's visa policy restricting new Iraqi arrivals, the return of around 1,700 Iraqis from Egypt to Iraq this year (reftel A), and the resettlement in third countries of around 600 Iraqis.

He pointed out that some of the Iraqis, who initially did not need UNHCR's assistance, are now running out of money and register to qualify for UNHCR's financial benefits.

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UNHCR Refugees and the Egyptian Government  
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14. (C) Al Attar noted that while Egypt signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention on refugee problems in Africa, domestic concerns are eroding the GOE's compliance with its obligation to protect refugees. He said Egypt is increasingly concerned with the implications of Egypt being seen as an asylum country, or a transit country to the West (reftel B). Egypt does not possess the financial resources to provide basic services for its own people, let alone for refugees. Al Attar said the GOE recently told UNHCR that it would now issue 6-month visas for newly registered refugees, but after that period these refugees must leave the country either through resettlement or repatriation.

15. (SBU) Al Attar said political and economic conditions in

Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa are forcing many Sudanese, Eritrean, and Ethiopian refugees to attempt to cross from Egypt into Israel, where they can earn up to USD 1000 per month as laborers. He pointed out that the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2005 changed the resettlement rules for South Sudanese. They now have little chance for resettlement and many try to reach Israel in hopes of a better life. Al Attar added that refugees, captured in their attempts to cross the border with Israel, are arrested and subsequently tried for illegally crossing the border. He said that the GOE sentences them to one-year prisoner terms, and then deports them back to their countries of origin without giving UNHCR access to them for determination of their refugee status. He pointed out that 1,700 Eritreans had suffered this fate in June 2008 (reftels C and D).

16. (C) The Ambassador stated that the USG is very concerned about Egypt's practice of shooting African migrants that attempt to cross the Egypt-Israel border, and has demarched the GOE on this issue on numerous occasions (reftels B and E). She asked Al Attar how we could work together to persuade the GOE to stop this practice. Al Attar said the Egyptian border guards are unsophisticated and only follow instructions. He told us that he urged the MFA's refugee office to be more sensitive to these migrants, pointing out that Egypt had 7 million workers in other countries that it did not want to be treated in a similar manner. Al Attar said his comments appeared to have little impact on MFA officials because "all issues dealing with the Egypt-Israel border are decided by President Mubarak and EGIS Chief Omar Sulayman." The Ambassador suggested that UNHCR's High Commissioner in Geneva write a letter to President Mubarak to dissuade him from continuing the policy of shooting migrants on the Egypt-Israel border. Al Attar agreed with the Ambassador and said he would act on her suggestion.

17. (C) Comment: UNHCR'S Cairo office is operating in a very challenging environment as it struggles to provide basic services for tens of thousands of refugees living in Egypt. Recent protests by Darfuri and Somali refugees highlight the lack of trust that the refugee community in Egypt has in UNHCR and its affiliated organizations to provide for their welfare (reftels E and F). Additionally, Sudanese refugees still partly blame UNHCR for the Mustafa Mahmoud incident,

which resulted in the deaths of 27 Sudanese refugees (reftel G). UNHCR's relationship with the GOE is also somewhat contentious. GOE officials have expressed to us the belief that the Cairo UNHCR office is not interested in resettling refugees, but instead is focused on maintaining the refugee population so as not lose more of its budget.

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